

Last month the Montana Senate voted to repeal the death penalty. As a conservative, I celebrated the vote as a reflection of our values to be efficient and judicious with taxpayer dollars and to rid our government of programs that don't work. As a pro-life advocate, I celebrated the vote as demonstration that all life is sacred, from conception to natural death.

If there was ever a government program that doesn't work, the death penalty is it. We've had a death penalty on the books for more than 35 years. During that time, only three people have been executed and two people remain on death row. Almost half of Montana's death sentences have ended with a life sentence in the end, after taxpayers already paid significantly extra for death penalty proceedings.

That's not a lot to show for a system that costs millions of dollars more than life without parole, according to research done by other states. (Montana has never bothered to do a full cost-benefit analysis of the death penalty here – which should raise suspicions for any conservative.)

We as Republicans pride ourselves on our razor-like focus on small, effective government. We don't waste taxpayer dollars. We don't throw precious resources into black holes and hope for the best. We don't build bloated, bureaucratic government systems and trust those systems to act for all Montanans. Except with the death penalty. Why is it that with the death penalty, we allow all of those things – things that run counter to everything we value as conservatives and Montanans?

I believe it's simply habit. And now those habits are crumbling, and it's none too soon. The death penalty may have seemed like a good idea 35 years ago. But we've learned a lot in the last three decades.

We now know that innocent people are sentenced to die. We know that evidence we once thought was reliable is sometimes mistaken. We know that we can't railroad people through the process, precisely because a life is on the line. Yet by taking our time and allowing more scrutiny on these cases, we've created a system that costs exorbitant amounts of money, court time, law enforcement time, and energy, while delaying justice for victims' families and causing them further pain.

Most importantly, we now know that those problems are irreconcilable, and they can't be fixed.

Human beings are fallible. We will never be able to guarantee accuracy and fairness in every case. How can we take a human life, knowing that life might be innocent? Has an innocent person been executed in Montana? I hope not. I'm certainly not willing to wait until it's too late before we do something about it. I'm not willing to sacrifice even one innocent life for us to learn the hard way. We have a chance to get out of the business of killing people now. Let's take it.

I've never been more hopeful about the prospect of repealing the death penalty in Montana. This summer I helped form Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty, which sponsored a table at the Montana Republican Convention. We were overwhelmed by the show of support for our group during the event. Our table was a buzzing hub of activity, and convention participants stopped by in a steady stream to tell us that they agreed with us, or even that they once supported the death penalty and now were evolving in their thinking.-

I believe that my conservative friends in the House will agree, and I call on them to vote in favor of abolition. It's time to rid Montana of the yoke of this bloated, ineffective policy, and get back to being the Montana we know ourselves to be.



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